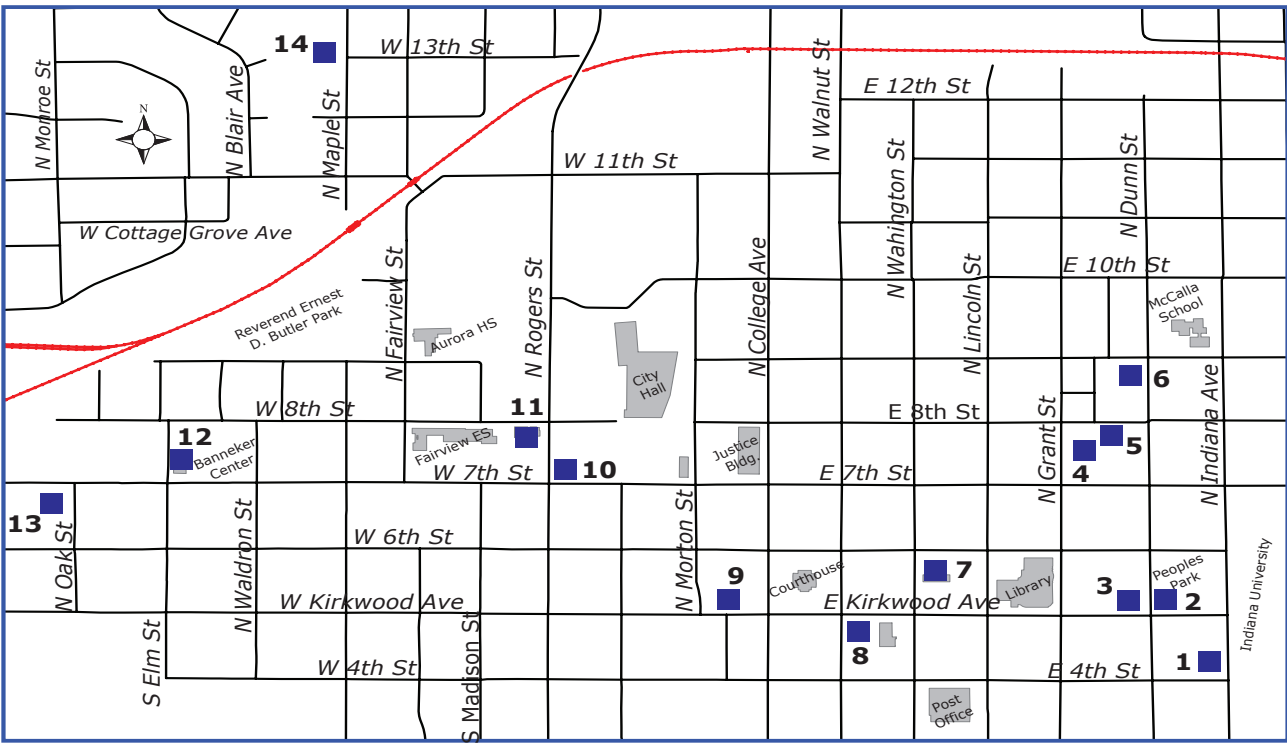


A Walk Through Bloomington's African American History

Historic Tour Guide No.14



City of Bloomington, Indiana



African American Walking Tour

Since its inception, the city of Bloomington has maintained a deeply rooted African American history. Two African Americans, William Cooley and Aaron Wallace, purchased lots in the November, 1818 land sale. Literally, it was the second such sale of parcels in the city's short history. No more information is available about these families, but census data from the 1860's through the 1880's document that the city attracted many African Americans primarily from Virginia, North and South Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, and Kentucky in the first waves of migration to the north. Although the Indiana State Constitution of 1816 outlawed involuntary servitude and African American citizens were free to live and work anywhere in the state, there were still those born into slavery in the south who fled to the north and were returned for bounty.

Bloomington's citizens were active participants in what has come to be known as the Underground Railroad, a conduit of escape organized by citizens who opposed slavery and assisted in hiding individuals fleeing to freedom in the North. The path of escape led from Walnut Ridge, south of Bloomington, to northern stops in Martinsville, Morgantown and Mooresville. In 1917, Henry Lester Smith, the son of an abolitionist, recounted his relative's stories of these harrowing times. Bloomington was also the destination of a generation of Scotch Irish Presbyterians from South Carolina who belonged to the Covenanter Church and settled here in the first half of the nineteenth century. Their houses, the Faris and Smith homes on the southeast side, now are landmarks along the trail to freedom. The stories of Lester Smith also recount the heroics of a Mrs. Myrears an African American who lived on the west side of town. It was on the west side, in a house that still stands at the corner of 7th and Rogers, where the local

Knights of the Golden Circle (southern sympathizers) purportedly met. Another prominent early resident, Robert Anderson, has a grave located in Covenanter Cemetery. Once an escaped slave, he chose to stay in Bloomington after emancipation. He joined the Presbyterian Church that supported his freedom and his heirs still reside on land near the cemetery at High and Hillside Streets.

After the Indiana legislature passed legislation in 1869, "colored" students were required to be educated in public schools. Prior to this, the Bloomington's Center School had been integrated and "colored" students occupied the upper floor. In 1874, "colored" students first began to attend a segregated grade school in Bloomington, in the same Center School building on the south east corner of 6th and Washington. White students moved to the recently completed "Central School" on South College. In 1881, there were 54 students under the age of 21 at Center School. T.C. Johnson, an eminent educator was the last principal of the Center School and first principal of the Banneker School which replaced it. He later went on to teach at Crispus Attucks High School in Indianapolis, now a National Historic Landmark. Elementary education in Bloomington remained segregated until 1951. Three early African American churches were founded in Bloomington, two of which date from the 1870's. In the early twentieth century the congregations prospered and built impressive architect-designed limestone edifices on the west side of town. Taylor Chapel, which remained on the east side, closed in the 1930's. The city's African American community shifted from the east side to the west after the Shower's Brother's Furniture Factory fire of 1884 and the relocation of the University to Dunn's Woods from Seminary Square. An early urban neighborhood that was commonly called "Bucktown" was located in the area between Grant to Indiana and south of 10th Street to 8th Street. Many of the residents in this area rented. It was also where Hoagy Carmichael visited house parties near his childhood home and heard the indigenous jazz that proved so influential in his music. These lives, filled with hard work, play and striving for the future, were a catalyst for creativity. George Shively, the left handed lead hitter for the Indianapolis ABC's, lived in this neighborhood. Later, following an opportunity to purchase their own homes, many in the African American community settled into an area north of Kirkwood and west of College, occupied primarily by the working classes of Bloomington.

A second but parallel story is that of African Americans at Indiana University. Marcellus Neal was the first African American student to graduate from IU in 1895. Preston Eagleson, a Bloomington native, was the first to play football and baseball at IU, graduating in 1896. The Eagleson family moved from Orange County, Indiana to Mitchell and on to Bloomington in the early 1890's. Preston Emmanuel Eagleson (AB 1896; MA 1906) was later the first of his race to receive a Master's Degree at Indiana University. It is thought that more degrees were conferred upon the Eagleson family from Indiana University than any other African American family—20 degrees and 2 honorary degrees. Wilson Vashon Eagleson (BS 1922; MS 1926 in Chemistry) married Frances Marshall (AB 1919, English), the first African American female to graduate from IU. The Marcellus Neal-Frances Marshall Black Culture Center on IU's campus is named for her. After rearing 9 children, Elizabeth Eagleson Bridgwaters (AB 1930) became a civic leader and was the first African American elected official in Monroe County. She served on the Monroe County School Board and was instrumental in the establishment of the Aurora Alternative High School.

The number of students continued to grow but were barred from university housing until 1947, when returning soldiers began to attend college on the GI Bill. A small enclave of private houses on the east and west sides opened up for boarders, along with an unofficial dining hall and several sorority and fraternity houses. In 1911, one of the first African American fraternities in the United States, Kappa Alpha Psi, was founded and incorporated on the IU campus by Elder Watson Diggs. Samuel Dargan, curator of the IU Law Library for 40 years, owned several properties near 8th and Lincoln where students resided. George Taliaferro lived in this neighborhood at May's House with other student athletes in the 1940's. Upon returning after his service in World War II, he worked with Herman B Wells, then president of the University, to integrate restaurants and theaters in Bloomington.

The small community of African Americans who raised their families in Bloomington made use of the opportunities provided by IU. Many sent their children to the university and many had to leave Bloomington to pursue professional careers. With dignity and patience, individuals like Reverend Ernest Butler, a civil rights activist who marched with Martin Luther King, and Elizabeth Bridgwaters, Bloomington's first African American school board member, became part of the city's political conscience. Others like Clarence Gilliam, a chemist by profession and long-time president of the NAACP, struggled to provide opportunities for advancement and a better quality of life. Three landmarks on the Westside, Second Baptist Church, Bethel A.M.E.Church, and the Banneker School, hold many stories and are monuments to Bloomington's African American community which thrived through the 1960's and faded as broader opportunities appeared and the local culture of lodges, clubs and social organizations began to dissolve. The legacy that remains is a testament to this community's achievement in the face of significant obstacles.

In Appreciation:

Financial support for this publication was provided by the Department of Housing and Neighborhood Development and Community and Family Resources Departments, City of Bloomington. Archival Photographs are courtesy of the William H. Mathers Museum, Elizabeth E. Bridgwaters Collection, Indiana University Archives, 1910 Indiana University Arbutus Yearbook, the family collection of Agnes Davis, and the Herald Times Archive. Special thanks to: Betty Bridgwaters, Beverly Calender-Anderson, Frances V. Halsell Gilliam, Laura Haley, Nancy Hiestand, and Doris Sims.